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ACADEMIC LIBRARY SERVICES AND THE DISADVANTAGED:  
THE NEEDS OF VISUALLY-HANDICAPPED LEARNERS

By

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Now that the drive for compulsory education for all in Zimbabwe is gathering momentum, it is appropriate to examine facilities which will support this thrust. Reading materials and audio-visual aids might be thought of as minimum requirements in the learning situation. For blind and partially-sighted learners, these things are also essential. This paper, therefore, will address the circumstances of blind learners in Zimbabwe as they prevail at present; explore the sources of necessary learning materials and describe efforts which are being made to make provision for the future.

Two types of schooling are offered to blind children in Zimbabwe. There are the special schools for the blind -- the one best known in Zimbabwe is the Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind at Copota Mission in Masvingo -- where all the pupils are blind, and where equipment and braille books have been collected over the years and so are readily available. The other type of schooling offered -- and this type is now very popular throughout the world -- is that of integration of a blind child into a regular school, where the blind child learns alongside sighted peers but spends part of the school day with a specialist teacher in a Resource Room. Here the child learns braille while in primary school, and later on, typing. The specialist teacher will prepare materials in braille for the children who attend the Resource Room. He will also prepare raised maps and diagrams which the blind children will need. This teacher is responsible for getting braille textbooks for his pupils.

At this point, the situation is uneven. The teacher expects to get braille copies of the set books from the Council for the Blind which has a braille production unit in Bulawayo. However, with more Resource Rooms being opened each year, the Council finds it difficult to supply all the necessary books in braille at present. Some dedicated specialist teachers braille entire textbooks for the blind children in their charge when these have not been available from the Council. It should be mentioned, at this point, that the Council is about to computerize its production of braille books, so the situation should improve in the near future.





Besides books, blind pupils need to be provided with audio-tactile materials. Recordings of books are sometimes used as an alternative to braille books, but these can only be made use of if the school possesses the equipment for playing such recordings.

Though a specialist teacher will get some equipment and some books from the Council for the Blind, and perhaps use his time and ingenuity to produce more, he will also hope to acquire materials for his pupils elsewhere. At this point, some schools tend to be more fortunate than others. Mission schools, and those schools that have a long tradition of educating blind children, tend to be better-equipped than more recently-established Resource Rooms. For example, at Waddilove, there are six tape recorders and fifteen braille machines. Some schools where there are blind pupils have one brailler and no tape recorder.

Overseas aid agencies donate equipment to some schools. Two such agencies which give materials to religious institutions throughout Africa are the Christofell Blindenmission, based in West Germany and the Lutheran World Federation based in Switzerland. This generosity results in mission schools often being better equipped than others.

Apart from capital equipment, the teachers themselves have to explore various avenues for getting other things which require, particularly braille and taped books.

There is no library in Zimbabwe where an extensive supply of braille books appropriate to the needs of students is kept. Tape and braille libraries for the blind in South Africa respond to individual requests for materials, and the R.N.I.B. Students' Braille Library in London regularly lends books to Zimbabwe.

Schools for the Blind and Resource Rooms at both primary and secondary school level have teachers who are familiar with blind learners and who have the skill of braille. However, at schools where blind students go for A-level studies, and at places of further education such as polytechnics or teacher-training colleges, there is not always a person qualified in education for the visually-handicapped available.





Such establishments rely heavily on advice from the Education Officer who has special responsibility for blind education, who is employed by the Ministry of Education. This person works alone, with no ancillary staff at present.

At the University of Zimbabwe, a support service for blind students has been in operation since May, 1986. Braille and taped books are borrowed in large numbers from libraries outside Zimbabwe for the use of students. It has become clear that some libraries overseas prefer to lend their materials to the administrator of a centre who is responsible for the distributing and collecting of the materials, and also responsible for returning them all to the library from whence they were borrowed, eventually. When library materials are dealt with in this way, it is easier to keep a check on them and they are less likely to go astray.

Besides obtaining books and tapes from overseas, the support service at the University -- which has been named the Reading Centre for Blind Students -- produces recordings of texts which are required reading for students. Since the support service started, a tape library of 200 recorded cassettes has been created with the help of a few dedicated people among the staff, students and members of Rotary in Harare.

A collection of catalogues from braille and tape libraries and from other organizations which provide for the needs of the blind has also been made, and efforts are made to keep the material up to date. Besides the tape and catalogue collection, there is extensive information on blindness-related matters in the form of pamphlets from both Britain and the U.S.A.

In order to make known to others involved in teaching the blind what is available at the University Reading Centre for Blind Students, an outreach programme was started at the beginning of 1987. Since then, this programme, which takes the form of a newsletter, has assumed a certain unenvisioned significance.

In December, 1986, a letter was sent to all teachers of the blind in Zimbabwe.





It included an account of the support work for blind students at the University of Zimbabwe and an invitation to teachers to send in information about their work, their pupils, problems and teaching hints. Although this letter went out in December just as all teachers were about to start their holidays, the response was such that the first issue of the newsletter went out in January and there have been issues each month since that time.

The significance of this newsletter is that teachers are responding to the idea of a vehicle for exchanging ideas and expressing their needs with overwhelming and on-going enthusiasm. Each month, letters are received which contain instructions for improvising equipment, details of work being done with blind pupils all over Zimbabwe, accounts of special problems and also reaction to the contribution of previous correspondents.

A suggestion of particular interest which is receiving much discussion through the medium of the newsletter is that an audio-tactile aids service should be established particularly for blind learners and their teachers. It has been further suggested that teachers who have made some useful teaching aid could send it to the centre where it could be copied, and the copy -- or copies -- could then be loaned to other teachers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Blindness is, according to the National Disability Survey of 1981, the most significant handicapping condition in Zimbabwe. It seems likely, therefore, that the number of blind and partially-sighted children in schools will increase. As these children move through the education system, some will undoubtedly develop interests and aptitudes that will lead them to seek places at institutions of further and higher education. Even now, for example, there are nine blind students in full-time courses at the University of Zimbabwe and there is one blind student at the School of Social Work. The Minister of Education, in a meeting with the representatives of the League of the Blind on April 15th promised that blind teacher-trainees would be accepted at Gweru Teacher-Training College (where they have previously been refused admittance).





Avenues will need to be opened up to enable a blind school-leaver to pursue the career which he desires and for which he shows aptitude. It is necessary even now to be thinking about the best and most feasible way of meeting the needs of blind learners and of supplying information and supporting materials to teachers, lecturers and instructors at all levels of our education system.

There is a need in this country, as in all others, to ensure that blind people are not discriminated against because of their blindness. The implication of this statement is that there must be resources here in Zimbabwe where materials can be supplied, information disseminated, and where anyone who is faced with the challenge of training or employing a blind person can receive both practical and psychological support and sympathetic encouragement.

At present, there are two organizations which are concerned with such matters: the Zimbabwe National Council for the Blind and the Zimbabwe National League of the Blind. The Council provides eye care services on the medical side, and supplies equipment including braille reading materials on the educational side. It seems clear that, on the educational side, the Council cannot by any means keep up with the demands made upon its resources by all the blind children now coming into the schools.

The League is an organization of blind Zimbabweans. At present, the members are mostly young educated people who are full of enthusiasm but lacking in experience. They are very anxious that their voices should be heard on any matters pertaining to the blind in Zimbabwe. As in other countries, Zimbabwe's educated blind people are saying that decisions about what blind people can or cannot do should not be made by sighted people. This is an important point.

Apart from the Council and the League, there is the Education Officer of the Ministry of Education, who has special responsibility for the blind. These three sources of information on matters pertaining to the blind are the main ones in the country.





In the light of the above, it seems clear that there is a need for academic library facilities for the visually-handicapped and for those who teach and employ them. Such library facilities would include the supplying of braille and taped reading materials and also the production of such materials. Audio and tactile materials would also be produced and available to borrowers. Such a centre would also have, as a significant feature of its work, a service which would provide information both in print and braille, and by means of counselling and advice on a personal basis to both blind people and sighted people who are in a position which means they have to teach, train, employ or work with blind people. The issue of a regular bulletin would keep people informed of on-going projects, available services and new materials.

Looking to the future, then, there are two proposals for such Library/Resource Centres which are being actively discussed at present.

One of these is a joint project of the League of the Blind and the Council for the Blind. This incorporates a library and production centre for braille and taped materials with offices of the national headquarters of the League of the Blind. Financing for this project is being sought from overseas aid agencies.

The second proposal comes from the University of Zimbabwe for the establishment of such a centre at the University. This would mean the formal recognition of the work which has already made significant progress, and would enable this work to gather momentum so that the academic support for university students could be extended to students and pupils in other institutions as the need arises. Also, more extensive outreach work could be initiated in the way of encouraging employers and others to discuss the prospect of employment and specialised training for blind applicants.

Production of materials would continue and speed up. These materials would then be available to all who need them. The resource collection of blindness-related information would be increased and made available throughout the country.





This second proposal is being considered by the University and the Government, and a decision should be taken soon.

In the light of the needs detailed above, the proposals for such specialized library/resource centres are indeed timely. If either or both of these proposals are accepted and receive the necessary funding, Zimbabwe will be firmly on the road to providing an example to the rest of Africa in recognizing the need to offer the best opportunities for education and fulfilment of ambition and potential for its visually-handicapped people.

Joan Addison  
April 25th, 1987

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